

# LAURIE BAKER

Sketching a master builder cluelessly

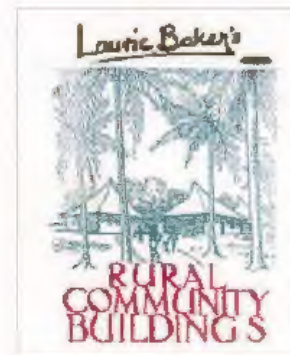
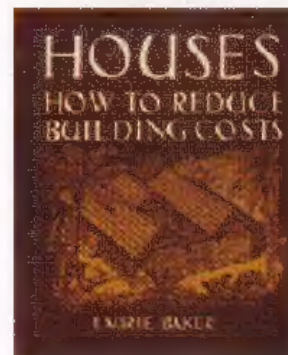
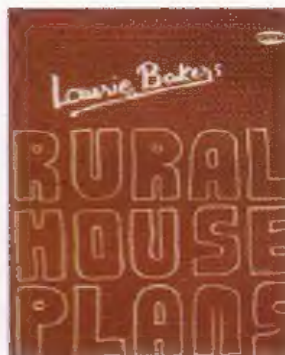
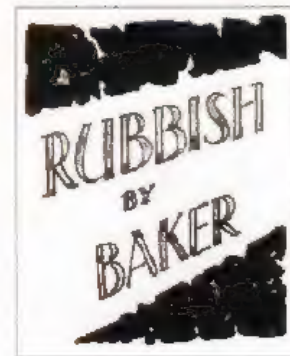
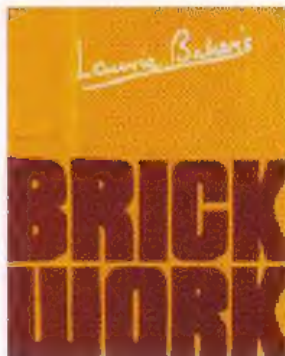
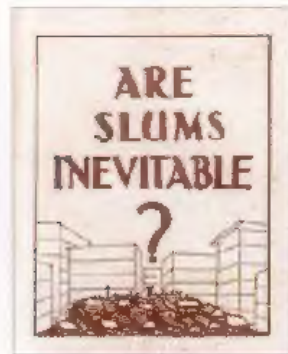
E. P. UNNY



**COSTFORD**

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**LAURIE  
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FOR BANTHAN STUDIOS

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# Laurie Baker

Sketching a master builder cluelessly

E.P. UNNY

**COSTFORD**





# Laurie Baker: Sketching a master builder cluelessly

E. P. UNNY

Sketches and writing by E.P. Unny

Commentaries on sketches by P.B. Sajan and Shailaja Nair

Front cover : Sketch of LBC Admin. office by E P Unny

Back cover : Sketch of LBC Dormitory by E P Unny

English

Writing & Sketches

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**COSTFORD and LBC**

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## Foreword

Metaphorically speaking, if the pen is like a sword in the hands of a writer, what is a pencil in the hands of a cartoonist? Few would argue that the pencil has often proved to be sharper than the pen. E.P. Unny, one of India's foremost political cartoonists, has been providing us through his 'Business as Usual' pocket-book cartoons in *The Indian Express* his reflections on contemporary India's trials and tribulations on a daily basis. However, Unny also uses his pencil for sketching people, places and creations in myriad fields often combining with scripts that are as sharp as his sketches.

Here Unny provides us with his sketches of buildings choreographed by Laurie Baker, who was also a cartoonist. The sketches are mostly, but not only, of buildings at the Laurie Baker Centre for Habitat Studies (LBC) with which Unny is associated. At our request, Unny also added two early creations of Laurie Baker – the residence of K.N. Raj and the main building of the Centre for Development Studies – as well as the buildings of the SEWA Training Centre, located next to the LBC.

We at the LBC wanted Unny to sketch the buildings as part of our efforts to document this Bakerian legacy and to disseminate to our vast constituency of students of architecture across the country and beyond. We record our gratitude to Unny for this contribution.

Along with our sister institution, the Centre of Science and Technology for Rural Development (known as COSTFORD), we have great pleasure in publishing this book on the occasion of the birth anniversary of our master Laurie Baker.

K. P. Kannan  
Chairman

Laurie Baker Centre for Habitat Studies and  
Centre of Science and Technology for Rural Development  
2nd March 2017

#

## **Laurie Baker: Sketching a master builder cluelessly**

You can see a fine critique of British architecture in the work of Osbert Lancaster. *Progress at Pelvis Bay and Drayne-flete Revealed* are books of his that show how small market towns of England got built and rebuilt over the decades, often mindlessly. Neither architect nor town planner, Lancaster was London's celebrity cartoonist who pioneered and popularised the single column pocket cartoon in *Daily Express* through 40 years from 1939.

A published cartoonist himself, Laurie Baker could have rivalled Lancaster. There was no dearth of material. Far from Birmingham where he was born, Baker spent most of his life in a Kerala in the throes of a building boom that pretty much ate up the landscape. Wasteful public spending and hard earned personal incomes together drove an explosion of eyesores in one of the best looking spots on the planet.

Baker did touch upon aberrated architecture in the occasional cartoon but didn't lampoon townscapes on Lancaster's scale. Instead he chose to build differently. "With missionary zeal", his acolytes would chip in. Not quite. You can't sustain mission mode for decades. More, the cartoonist within was far from dormant to let passion rule.



Adept at sourcing and tweaking any resource at hand, Baker put his note pad too to good use. Associates recall how 'Bakerji' doodled even as he sat through mandatory meetings to bring the much needed relief to the officialese in the air. More functionally, he would pull out his pen in the middle of his presentation to do a quick sketch that advanced the thought. Come to think of it, this is what the word 'cartoon' originally meant – a rough drawing artists made to model finer art work. Only, the cartoonish sketch here did much more. It blueprinted living spaces.

Built brick by brick into the elements, these spaces hold like a float in the air. You can see visitors to the Baker-built Centre for Development Studies, some hard headed economists and social scientists, gaze at the bare brick work and break into poetry. Photographers and cinematographers have famously followed the play of light through these signature arches and apertures as the day wore on. Words and tones can tell the Baker story. Not so easy when you are working with mere lines.

Try and sketch the simplest of Baker structures and you sweat. Forget the towering facades that mark and the airy atriums that open up institutional spaces. Even the mere one room units you sight as you enter the Laurie Baker Centre don't quite yield to the sketch pen. Masonry seems to have sprung up like wild growth, almost organically in the abandoned quarry that houses the centre. You stand and stare wondering where the horizon line has vanished. You follow the bending roof, the curving wall and the terraced floor cluelessly hoping the ensuing scrawl would



somehow bear decent resemblance to the object in view. Things take a different turn when a team of architecture students from Chandigarh descends. Some click pictures, some amble along, some run up and down the stairways and a couple of them blends into a sit out originally meant as an open kitchen. These young men and women just walked in and belonged. And here you are, still negotiating with Baker-scape. Perhaps these spaces are built to be lived in and not sketched out. Even so sheer practice should help. After 21 drawings through three full days and a half, you are no wiser. Not that there is any mystique out here. It is just that this impish architect offers no easy patterns. Even motifs recur suitably improvised. Structures unfold like a raga, with much cohesion and no notation. More than the architect and the artist, perhaps the musician will appreciate this master builder.

E P UNNY

2nd December 2016

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### **1. K. N. Raj's residence**

K.N. Raj, one of India's renowned economists and public intellectuals, got a house designed and built by Laurie Baker in 1971 in Trivandrum before he decided to invite him to build the Centre for Development Studies. The house has a total area of around 4,470 sq.ft. and the total expenditure amounted to Rs.60 thousand.







## **2. Centre for Development Studies (CDS)**

The CDS is the first institutional complex designed and built by Laurie Baker. The then Chief Minister C Achutha Menon played a catalytic role in sanctioning this building proposal by overcoming the objections of the Public Works Department. Through the creation of the CDS, three outstanding personalities - C. Achutha Menon, K.N. Raj and Laurie Baker - came together to form a formidable team in presenting Kerala with an alternative vision in cost-effective and environment-friendly architecture and building construction. This sketch shows the main building and the Library Tower.

### **Laurie Baker Centre for Habitat Studies (LBC)**

Most sketches in this booklet are about the LBC. These buildings, except a couple of them, are the last designs of Laurie Baker. The set of main buildings that constitute the LBC campus were built under his guidance during the period 1996 to 2000. It was originally built for an organization called 'Navyatra' conceptualized and run by Kieth Saldhanah, a friend of Baker, which was later purchased by the LBC with the help of a grant from the Government of Kerala. The LBC is dedicated to the advancement of research, training and dissemination in the making of a Green Habitat that was at the heart of Laurie Baker's philosophy and work.





### **3. LBC entrance**

The entrance to LBC campus is bounded by an undulating compound wall with niches containing its name in Malayalam and English.



#### **4. Watchman's Cabin**

The single watchman's cabin, an eye-shaped building, is set away from the entrance. Outside are seats inviting passersby to linger.



## 5. Waiting Shed

Originally conceived as a bandstand, this construction on the way to the main buildings of the campus acts as a waiting or resting place for students and visitors. The roof is made of untreated bamboo and cement plaster





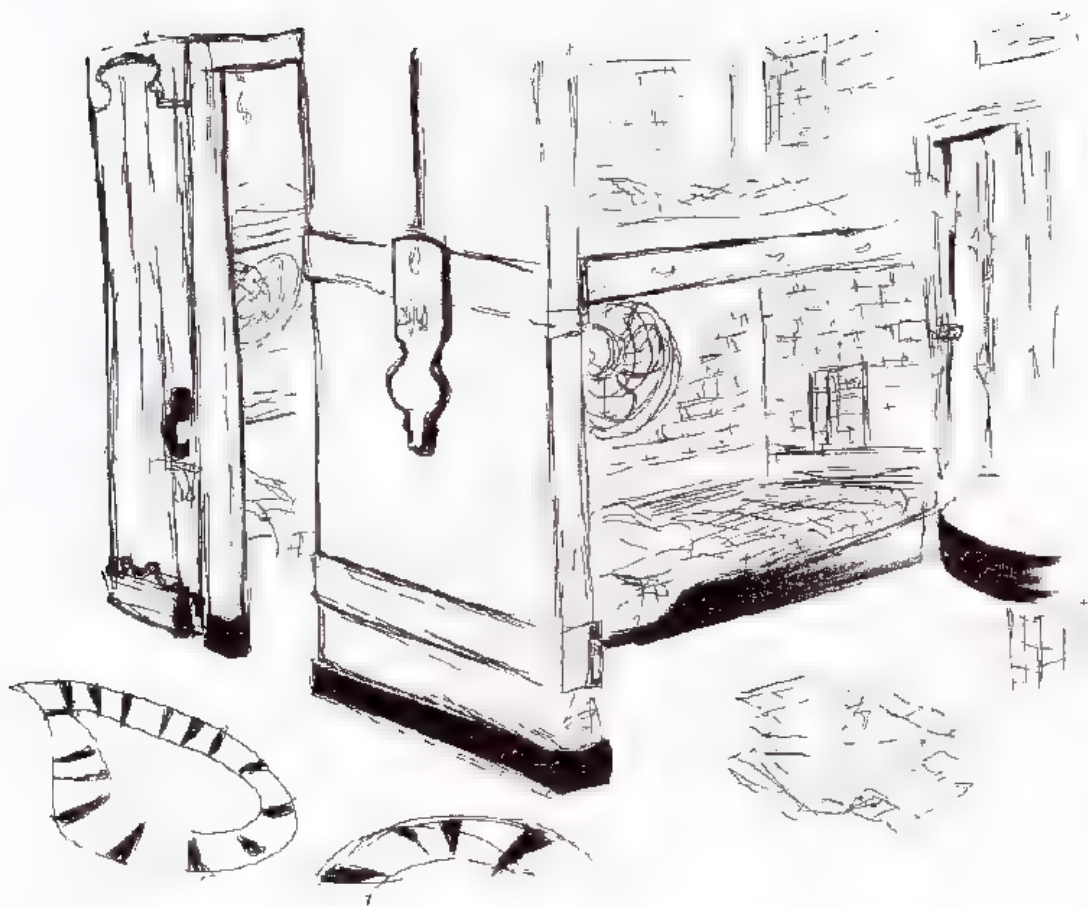
## **6. Dormitory Building**

This building with curvilinear walls houses dormitories and guest rooms. The curved roof rises to include a side-open lecture hall.



## **7. Dormitory details**

The many built in furniture including seats and bunk beds are a feature of the dormitory block.



### **Dormitory details**

Bunk beds in the dormitory.





## **8. Dining Hall**

The curvilinear dining hall with its undulating roof ends in a kitchen which nestles into the hill side.



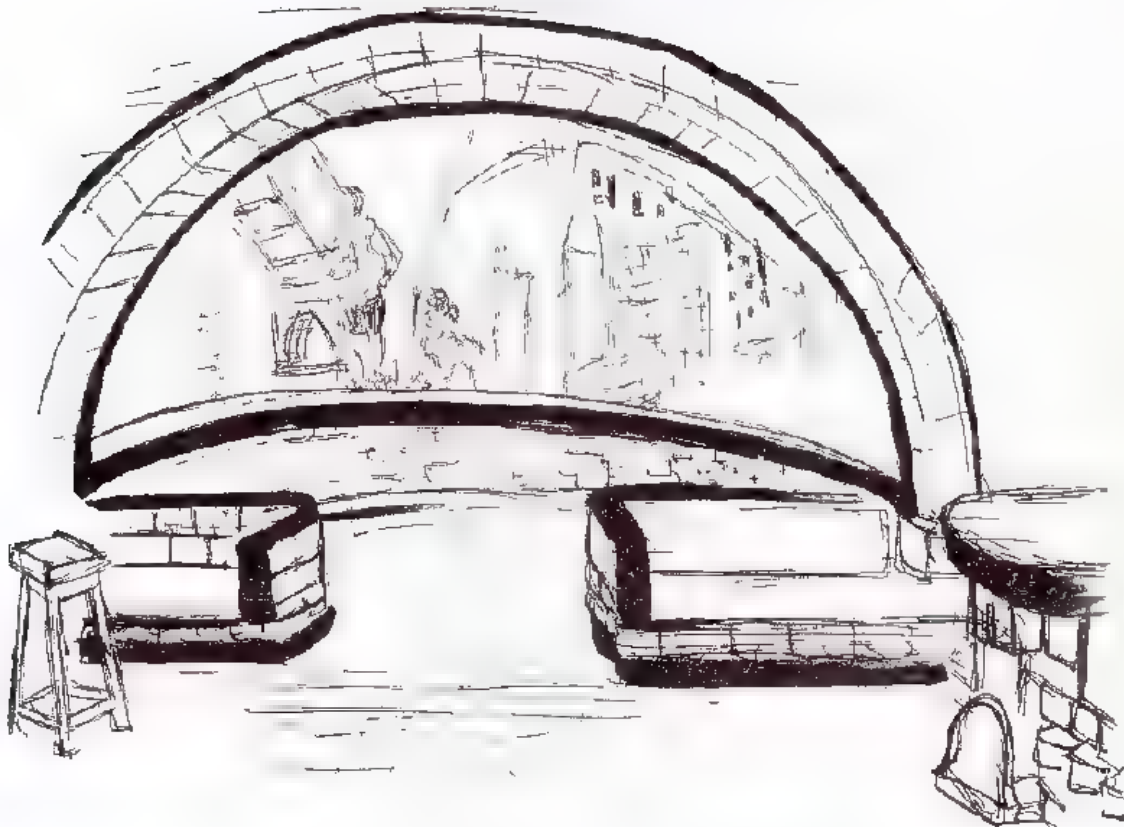
## **9. Administrative Block ground floor**

A sit out welcomes one into a single room office, currently occupied by the Chairman, at the lower level of the administrative block.



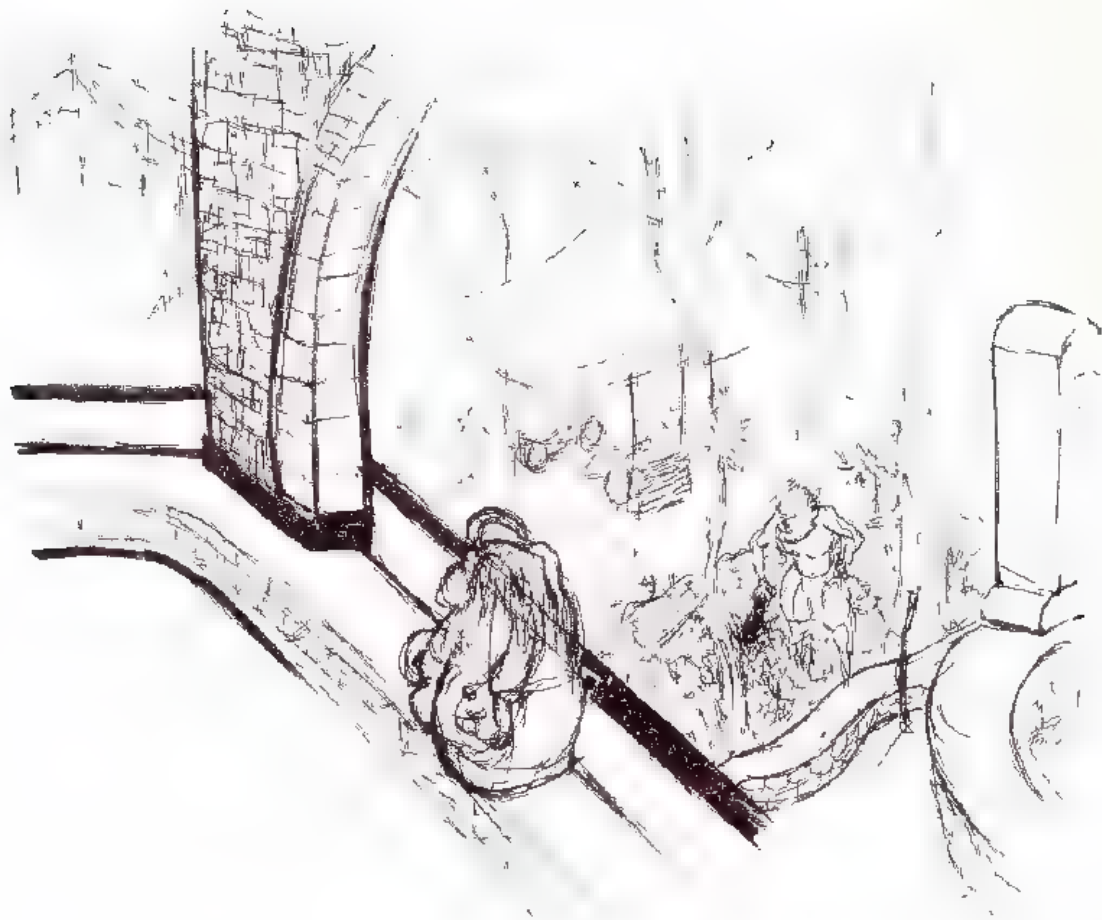
### **10. Administrative Block first floor**

A winding path leads to the upper storey of the administrative block where there is an informal open discussion area leading from an office area.



### **11. View from the sit-out**

A view of the sit-out from the discussion area.



## **12. View to valley**

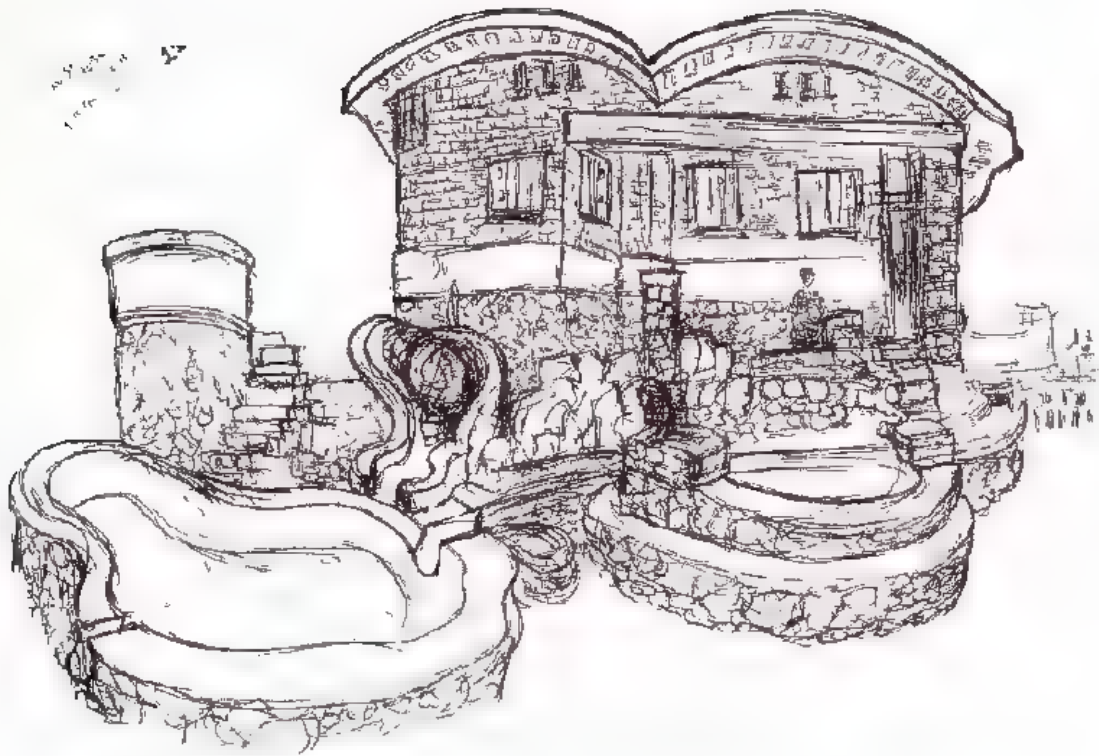
The discussion area in the administrative block overlooks the valley with a view of the organic farming patches and the hands-on training shed.





### **13. Summer school building**

The result of training conducted during the annual Summer School programme, this building is a combination of brick, mud and bamboo symbolizing the movement to more sustainable building materials. An example of taking the Baker legacy to more environment-friendly buildings.



#### **14. Guest house**

Water harvesting tanks flank the way to the Guest House which is reached by steps leading upward from the administrative block. The guest rooms and a living room are built around a central courtyard.



### **16. In contemplation**

A Visitor sitting in the common area in the Guest House.



### **15. Visiting architecture students**

Students taking a break during the hands-on session.



### **17. Rain water harvesting tank and Lookout tower**

Located at the highest point in the campus. Above the tank is a viewing area which can also double as a space for meditation or yoga practice.





### **8. LBC Documentation Centre (ongoing construction)**

This building will house the documentation office of LBC. Initially works of Laurie Baker and COSTFORD will be documented, followed by similar initiatives. Walls are built with split bamboo being left exposed on the exterior and the interior is wattle and daub. The floors and roof are made of bamboo and mud. This is another example of taking forward the Baker legacy to more environment-friendly and cost-effective buildings.

*[This building is being built under the Member of Parliament's Local Area Development Scheme of Dr. T.N. Seema (Member of Rajya Sabha)].*

**SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) Rural Centre,  
Vilappilsala**

The SEWA Centre is located adjacent to the LBC. This was also designed and built by Laurie Baker. Facilities available here are also utilized by LBC for its training programmes.



### **19. SEWA – A view from the road**

The office building and lecture hall with a water harvesting pool in the foreground can be seen from the approach road. Though they look like single storey buildings, they each have a storey below.



## **20. Lecture hall at SEWA**

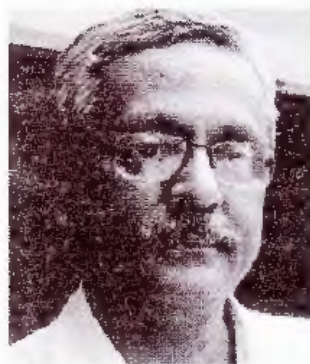
One approaches the lecture hall through an arch cut out from the arch shaped roof of the office building which comes down all the way to the ground. Steps to the left lead down to a dining hall and kitchen below it.



## **21. Dormitory**

The two storied dormitory accommodating 75 persons follows the slope of the site.





### **E.P. Unny**

E.P. Unny went to school and college in Palakkad, Kerala. After graduating in Physics and a brief stint as banker, he joined cartooning in 1977 as Staff Cartoonist with *The Hindu* in Chennai. After 12 years he migrated to Delhi to join *The Sunday Mail* and went on to work for *The Economic Times* from 1993 to 1996 when he joined *The Indian Express* where he is the Chief Political Cartoonist. He has penned and sketched the following books: *Spices & Souls: A Doodler's Journey through Kerala*, a pictorial travel book in English brought out by DC Books Kottayam, 2001; *Language, Landscape & Livelihoods, Sketches & notes on Five Drought-prone Districts of Andhra Pradesh*, a visual audit of drought-hit districts brought out by the Programme Support Unit, Andhra Pradesh Rural Livelihoods Programme, 2003; *Business As Usual: Journey of the Indian Express Cartoonist*, A collection of cartoons published in *The Indian Express* from 1996 – 2009, Rupa & Co., 2009 and *Santa and the Scribes : The Making of Fort*

Kochi, Niyogi Books, New Delhi, 2014. He authored a couple of graphic narratives: *Free India*, a graphic novel in the Sunday edition of the Indian Express. 2007 and *Of Ghosts and Writers : A Graphic Story* published in Present Tense, Living on the Edge, Writers' Retreat II, Landour, Mussoorie, Roli Books. 2004.

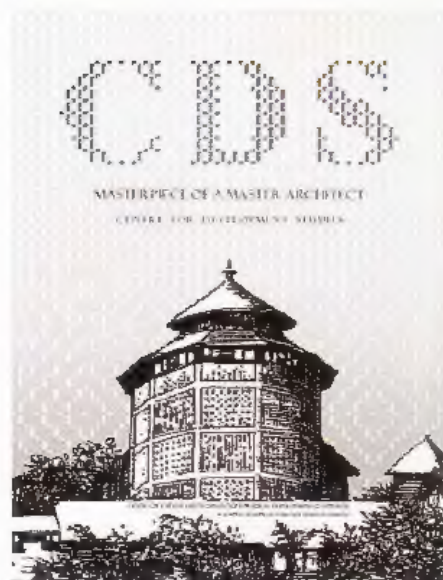
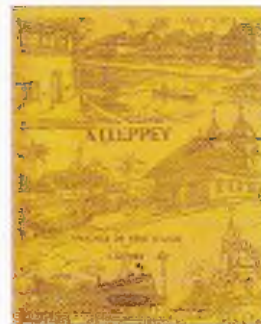
Unny has also published occasional graphic shorts in Malayalam. He also done life sketches of people and places extensively across the country. Currently he is sketching for a book on Tamil Brahmins in Kerala researched and written by M. K. Das, one of the distinguished senior journalists and former Editor (Kerala) of *The Indian Express*.

Unny's work has featured at the Asian Cartoonists Conference in Tokyo (1996) and at the International Cartoon Festival in Carquefou, France (2006).

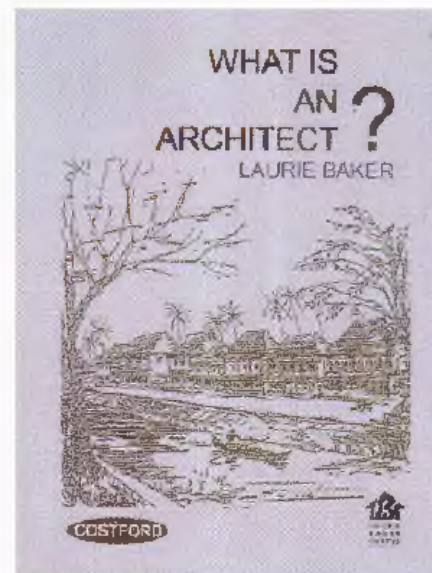
In 2009, Unny won the Lifetime Achievement Award of The Indian Institute of Cartoonists.

He is an Honorary Fellow at the Laurie Baker Centre for Habitat Studies, Thiruvananthapuram.

## Other titles in the series



CDS Masterpiece of a Master Architect



What is an Architect?



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